

Tennyson's Poem - The Charge of the Light Brigade

By Dr. Douglas J. Austin 14 [TWC 26(1) p7 2008]

Admire it or not, Tennyson's poem is one of the abiding mementoes of the Crimean War and many have been drawn to the subject by its rhythm and power. This article provides some information on the date and circumstances of its composition and of the progressive changes in its wording. The Editor and Helen Warwick's article '*Bacon, Baker and Broome: Three Related Chargers*' (on p10 of the October, 2007 issue of this journal) presents what appears to be a unique record of three 'Chargers' commemorated on one family headstone. In the colour photographs of that headstone, I was surprised by the variant wording of the extract from the poem, as follows:

"Charge! was the Captain's cry:
Theirs, not to make reply:
Theirs, not to question why:
Theirs, but to do or die:
"Into the Valley of Death,
"Rode the Six Hundred.
"Honour the Brave and Bold!
"Long shall the Tale be told.
"Yea, when our Babes are old,
"How they rode onward.

In the main photograph, the first word of the last line looks like 'Holy', but close inspection and comparison with Tennyson's drafts permits its reading as 'How'. We are not told when that headstone was erected but, from what follows, I believe that the wording was drawn from '*Maud and Other Poems*' by Alfred Tennyson, Poet Laureate, published by Moxon¹ in London in early July, 1855. Gerald Massey's review of that volume in "*The Edinburgh News*" for Saturday, 28 July 1855, included:- "...Besides the poem of "Maude," there are seven others in the book, two of which we have had before - the "Duke's Funeral" and the "Charge of the Light Brigade." The latter has been rewritten. The present version omits the "Down came an order which some one had blundered," which we are glad of, as it was neither true nor poetical.² But we miss the last lines -

"Oh, The wild charge they made!
Honour the Light Brigade!
Noble six hundred!"

which, we submit to Mr. Tennyson's consideration, is a fine and necessary conclusion.... •

The authoritative text of the poem appears in Volume II of the Eversley Edition of '*The Works of Alfred, Lord Tennyson*' published in nine volumes by Macmillan, London, 1907-1908. The usual story is that Tennyson, spurred by the phrase 'some hideous blunder' in '*The Times*' leader on the Battle of Balaklava, dated Monday, 13 November, 1854, composed '*The Charge of the Light Brigade*' very rapidly, that it quickly achieved wide popularity and was printed for the British troops in the Crimea. A search for further information on the development of the poem led me to a Google Books page image from Kathryn Ledbetter's '*Tennyson and Victorian Periodicals: Commodities in Context*' (Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2007: ISBN 0754657191). On page 126 of that book, she states 'Tennyson's poem appears as natural addendum to war news in the 9 December issue of '*The Examiner*'. Edgar F. Shannon and Christopher Ricks provide an excellent, important record of revisions for this poem '...after making changes to tone down the poem³, Tennyson reverted to the Examiner version for 2000 quarto pamphlets of the poem later printed for distribution to soldiers at Sebastopol in August, 1855, after the revised version appeared in volume format with Maud.⁴

The Shannon and Ricks article is referenced as '*The Charge of the Light Brigade: The Creation of a Poem*' in '*Studies in Bibliography*', 38 (1985): 1-44 - a series from the Bibliographical Society of Virginia. Fortunately, that periodical is available on-line at <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/bsuva/sb/> (click on '8' then on the first article). As a convicted devotee of detail, I was delighted to find that every available source has been recorded and assessed by Shannon and Ricks, making the whole article well worth reading. From it, I quote as follows:- "It is a story that has remained ambiguously and incompletely told. His son, Hallam Tennyson, has recorded that an account in The Times of the astonishing action of the Light Cavalry Brigade in the Crimean War inspired Tennyson to write the poem; but there was more than one article in The Times about what has now become that famous charge, and no one heretofore has examined The Times carefully to discern how the poet drew upon it. Furthermore, the text went through some twenty states before it reached its nearly final form. Fortunately, manuscripts, proofs, and letters that have survived in libraries and private hands both in England and the United States make it possible to trace in considerable detail the skill and tact - themselves illuminated by a major temporary lapse - with which the artist perfected his work.

It was on 25 October 1854, in the Battle of Balaclava, that the Light Cavalry Brigade suffered grievous casualties and made itself immortal, and to speak of the Charge of the Light Brigade is already to pay tribute to Alfred Tennyson.⁵ On 13 November 1854 a leader in The Times, telling the British public of 'the attack on Balaklava' and 'the terrible form of a splendid self-sacrifice', declared: 'The British soldier will do his duty, even to certain death, and is not paralyzed by feeling that he is the victim of some hideous blunder'. Those last three words moved Tennyson by their substance and their cadence to create the line which his son came to believe had actually figured in The Times: 'Some one had blunder'd'.

The next day, 14 November, The Times carried both a further leader, on this 'fatal display of courage which all must admire while they lament', and their special correspondent's account for 19-28 October (headed as having 'appeared in our second edition of yesterday', so that Tennyson may have read this too in his copy of the paper for the previous day). William Howard Russell, the first war-correspondent and probably still the greatest, reported vividly and poignantly the Brigade's 'desperate valour'.

'On Dec. 2nd', Hallam Tennyson was to report, 'he wrote "*The Charge of the Light Brigade*" in a few minutes, after reading the description in The Times in which occurred the phrase "some one had blundered," and this was the origin of the metre of his poem.' This statement gives the impression that Tennyson read the description in The Times on 2 December and wrote the poem forthwith, but his wife, Emily, is no doubt correct in saying that it was composed 'as a recollection of the first report in The Times'. The earliest extant manuscript (MS1), which is in Tennyson's autograph, does not have the opening four lines, beginning 'Half a league, half a league,' or the final stanza. The second manuscript (MS2) is largely in the hand of Emily Tennyson, though the title, some corrections, and the last six lines are in Tennyson's hand, as are the signature 'A. T.' and a footnote about the number of participants in the charge: 'Written after reading the first report of the Times correspondent where only 607 sabres are mentioned as having taken part in the charge'. This manuscript Tennyson and his wife sent to John Forster, the editor of the Examiner, on Wednesday 6 December, with the following letter:

Dec. 6/54 My dear Forster

If you like to put this into your paper put only A. T at the foot. Six is much better than seven hundred (as I think) metrically so keep it & put the note I have made at the bottom.

I have no time to add more, the post just going, only if you do not put it in this week let me know as I may alter it for the next ever yours with our love

A Tennyson

[Postscript in Emily Tennyson's hand] If you think that Stanza crossed out "Half a league, half a league[""] would begin the poem better than the present beginning will you put it [in] please? Make it begin "Half a league half a league[""] - as a separate stanza if not omit the stanza altogether.

Tennyson's wife is contradictory concerning the date of composition itself. In the letter to Forster, she refers to the poem as 'written yesterday' (5 December); but the entry in her Journal under 2 December confirms the son's date: 'A. wrote "*The Charge of the Light Brigade*" & sent it to The Examiner' ... A letter from Tennyson to Forster with a postscript by his wife, also dated 6 December, establishes that he and his wife actually posted the poem to the Examiner on 6 December (1854).

With my interest in Captain Nolan's actions at Balaklava, I am struck by Tennyson's progressive toning down of his poem, from naming Nolan on 9 December, 1854 [Shannon and Ricks state "The charge, in more than one sense⁵, is lacking from the Examiner's text: "Take the guns," Nolan said], to naming 'Captain' in early June, 1855 [*Maud and Other Poems* published by Moxon, 1855] and then to naming 'Someone' thereafter [Eversley Edition of '*The Works of Alfred, Lord Tennyson*', Macmillan, London, 1907-1908]. Following the Charge of the Light Brigade, many voices were raised against Nolan as (allegedly) the author of catastrophe. Some later modified their opinions. Some never did - but then, they wouldn't, would they?

References:

¹ 'Edward Moxon (1801-1858), Publisher. See <http://homepage.ntlworld.com/john.moxon/edwardmoxon.html>.

² Curious wording - given that marked controversy over the Fourth Order was already well-established - and has persisted to this day.

³ Tennyson may have progressively toned down his poem because of early reports that Captain Nolan was at least not wholly culpable for the Light Brigade catastrophe. For example, in 'The Times' for 18 November, 1854, Russell (writing on 28 October) stated:- "There is a rumour that the cause of our disaster is being closely investigated by the authorities, and that it does not appear poor Captain Nolan was so much to blame as was at first supposed by those who did not know his strict character as an officer and a soldier."

⁴ I have not yet traced a copy of that pamphlet. Shannon and Ricks quote from Tennyson's letter of 6 August, 1855, "It is the greatest favourite of the soldiers - half are singing it & all want to have on black & white - so as to read ['it' deleted] - what has so taken them." I do not know what tune was involved in 1855, but the poem was set to music several times thereafter.

⁵ The written order did not use the word 'attack', but the Light Brigade most certainly charged home against the Don Cossack No.3 Heavy Battery in the North Valley.